

HOW CAN CUSTOMER EDUCATION IN THE COFFEE SECTOR INCREASE CUSTOMER SATISFACTION?

Abstract

Customer education has been widely recognized to play a key role in client satisfaction, particularly in the context of industrial markets (Business-to-Business or B2B). However, little is known about the effect of customer education on customer satisfaction within the B2D (Business-to-Distributors) sector. To address this gap, the paper develops a comprehensive model of consumer education applied to the mass consumption of coffee and seeks to verify its suitability relative to this industry. After reviewing the international literature on customer education, an analysis of Honebein and Cammarano's (2011) model allows the development of an adapted framework and then to validate it through a case study of a major private coffee distributor - a pioneer Italian company in the industry. The findings illustrate that this adapted model fits well with the coffee industry and identifies six dimensions of customer education which would lead to increased customer satisfaction. Despite the fact that this is an explorative study and needs to be applied to a larger number of cases, and testing via subsequent regression analysis, some early managerial implications from the retailer perspective are provided. Finally, the conclusion offers avenues for future research.

Keyword: *Customer education; Consumer behavior; Customer satisfaction; Customer relationship management; Experience marketing; Coffee sector.*

Track No: 51. Consumer behaviour

Introduction

It has been shown that it is six to seven times more expensive to gain a new customer than to retain an existing customer (White House Office of Consumer Affairs, cited in Forbes, www.forbes.com, 2015). For example: 55% of consumers who intend to make a purchase back out because of poor customer service and 40% of customers begin purchasing from a competitor because of their reputation for great customer service (Zendesk, as cited, *ibid*). Admittedly based on limited data, one can see how customer satisfaction is the lifeblood of business. This research aims to verify how 'customer education' can improve customer satisfaction and if customers find value in the services that such education offers in a sector more and more involved in these educational programs. Customer education (CE) can be

defined as a company's role in providing consumers with the information, skills, and abilities needed to become a more informed buyer. While CE can take many different forms (Aubert and Gotteland, 2010; Monnot, 2010, cited in Volle, 2012, pp. 31-32), it is most effective when used to engage online shoppers and in-store customers. However, while intended messages remain the same, these two areas of customer education can vary significantly (Aubert and Gotteland, 2010) albeit with an objective to give consumers all relevant information regarding the product or service at hand. Many authors have claimed that trust and its implications is essential for developing and building efficient customer-relationships. In distinguishing themselves from competitors, businesses should - according to Bitner *et al.* (1994) - pay attention to service quality. For example, especially in mature product markets, service quality is a key asset for competitiveness and success (Bell and Eisingerich, 2007). According to Sharma and Patterson (1999), customer education can be considered as the extent to which service employees inform customers about service-related concepts and explain the pros and cons of service products they recommend to customers. Bell and Eisingerich (2007) showed that perceived technical and functional service quality can have a significant and positive effect on trust by testing several hypotheses in an empirical model. On the other hand, customer education can also significantly and positively affect customer trust. The positive and significant relationship between CE and functional service quality indicates that the impact of functional service quality on customer trust can be stronger when CE is high. Furthermore, a negative relationship between technical service quality and CE can be further weakened as customer expertise atrophies. Finally, Bell and Eisingerich (*ibid*) showed that the positive moderating impact of CE in the interaction between functional service quality and trust is reinforced as customer expertise increases. They concluded in line with previous research that CE has a significant, direct, and positive impact on customer trust. Not only in supporting customers in using critical information, CE is likely to create further credibility with customers about the sincerity of an organization's efforts. Especially when confronted with intangible products, it was shown that customers perceive an organization's effort to provide product information as an important and valuable service augmentation. Aubert *et al.* (2007) investigated the effects of customer education on the skills level, usage behavior and satisfaction of customers. In analyzing 321 consumers who owned a digital camera for a certain period of time and by using structural equation modeling to validate the model, they found that CE had a significant impact on consumers' skills improvement, which in turn, positively impacted satisfaction. They further showed that skill improvement had a significant positive effect on product usage intensity and the variety of functionalities that customers can

use via a camera after having been ‘taught’. On the other hand, they also showed there was no direct interaction between product usage intensity and satisfaction. In order to investigate how CE can increase customer satisfaction, this paper addresses the following research questions juxtaposed to the general question of how CE works with regard to an SME in a located in a B2D market: RQ1. How can Honebein and Cammarano’s CE model be used in the coffee sector to create customer satisfaction? RQ2. Is Honebein and Cammarano’s CE model appropriate for building customer satisfaction in the coffee sector? In exploring and answering these research questions, this paper first reviews the CE literature, and proposes and adapts Honebein and Cammarano’s CE model. Second, this model is applied, through an in-depth interview with the Marketing Director, to an Italian major private coffee distributor. Finally results of this depth interview are discussed in order to offer nascent managerial implications and draw conclusions of the paper.

The Role of Customer Education (CE)

In the last years there has been increasing demand for CE because of usage criteria (Aubert, 2006), complex services and novice consumers (Burton, 2002). Such education can be delivered through educational programs such as professional advice, blogs, seminars, advertising, forums and other online and offline activities (Suh *et al.*, 2015). CE can result in several organizational advantages: it enhances individual product knowledge, facilitates product purchases (Zhou *et al.*, 2013), enhances customer loyalty through perceived service quality (Suh *et al.*, 2015) and can have great potential for attracting and retaining customers. The purpose of any educational approach is often to change behavior (Honebein and Cammarano, 2011). Bloom (1956) developed an important model that promotes higher forms of thinking in education, such as analyzing and evaluating, rather than just teaching students to remember facts (rote learning) and shares learning in three domains: cognitive, affective and psychomotor. Nevertheless, when applying this early model in practice, it turned out that it did not always work to change behavior. Therefore, Gilbert (1978) discovered along with other colleagues new solutions for changing behavior, many of which were not focused on education in the traditional sense. This concept became known as ‘human performance’ (as discussed by Cammarano and Honebein, 2011). In designing education, it is essential to clearly define what an audience can and may learn. Thus, a content and task analysis needs to be carried out. For developing content, existing content sources, interview subject-matter experts, and other educational material can be considered. Nevertheless, these sources only

answer the question of what customers need to know partially. Therefore, it is important that businesses ask their customers what they need to know and what they would like to do. This aspect is part of the innovatory aspects of CE, as it gives the taught group or individuals the opportunity of self-designing their education. This approach is thus not primarily teacher-centered, but more student-centered, or business-centered in the case of business (Honebein and Cammarano, 2011). In order to adopt such an approach, companies might organize groups of customers, provide them with a general description of what the company does, and then ask the customers to write down any questions they may have about the subject. With these questions, the content and delivery format of the teaching program can be adjusted. Follow-up discussion to the questions involves comprehension of why a customer needs to know the answer to the question she or he posed before and to prioritize the questions. The question “Why?” as a response to the customer becomes thus an essential part of the teaching, as it enables the customer to explore the answers to her or his questions personally. Trust plays a very important role in this context. Before a customer can develop a certain attitude toward a brand (as described in Bloom’s 1956 model), the customer needs to have certain knowledge or skills that may eventually align with the attitude (Honebein and Cammarano, 2011). When preparing the content for the customer teaching, it is crucial to prioritize topics and to find the most essential aspects, as too much content might not be recalled (Honebein and Cammarano, 2011). In general, there is a strong relationship between marketing and customer education, so it is beneficial to adopt an integrated marketing communications approach for disseminating CE. Such a concept seeks to appropriately mix advertising, personal selling, public relations, direct marketing, and sales promotion media channels in a customer-oriented manner. Every customer touchpoint should be seen as an opportunity for education (Honebein and Cammarano, 2011). Other models developed different aspects of customer education. An important model, for example, has been developed by Temerak *et al.* (2009): this is an overarching model of the relationship between customer education and customer participation. It consists of consists of four basic parts, namely, forms of customer education, forms of customer participation , psychological mechanisms mediating customer education – participation relationships and contextual factors moderating customer education effects.

Introduction to the Model of Customer Education

Honebein and Cammarano (2005) connected Gilbert’s (1978) concepts with respect to ‘human performance’ with their own approach and coined their term as ‘customer

performance'. This revised term necessitates orchestration of four crucial elements in creating a customer experience focused upon changing a customers' behavior so that this customer can successfully accomplish jobs and tasks. These are shown and modelled in Figure 1:

- (1) Vision: goals, feedback, and expectations that guide and shape performance;
- (2) Access: the experience environment includes processes, tolls, interfaces, and information, that enables performance;
- (3) Incentives: Rewards and punishments that motivate performance;
- (4) Expertise: Customer education that enhances the knowledge, skills and attitudes required for performance (Honebein and Cammarano, 2005).

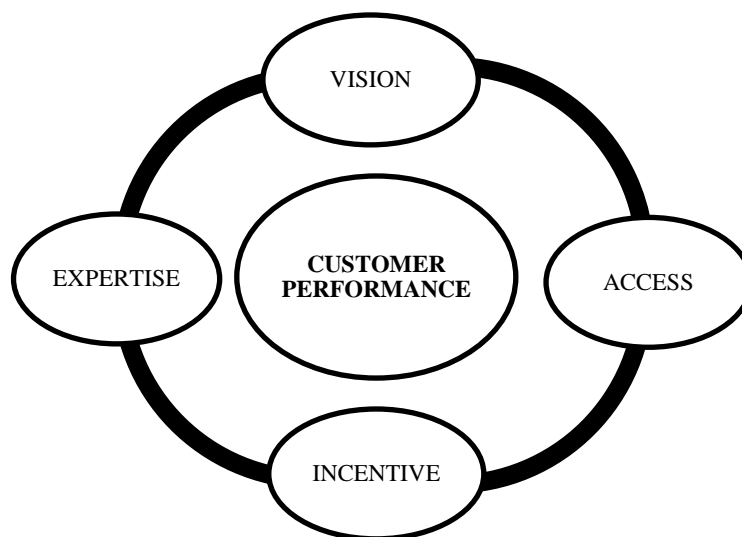


Figure 1. *The customer performance model*

Source: *Adapted from Honebein and CAMMARANO (2005)*

The nature of the task is not of principle importance, as an experience that effectively orchestrates the four elements permits better customer performance and thus successful completion of the respective task, which leads to greater customer satisfaction. It is thus important to associate “customer performance” with “customer education”, as the performance experience is crucial for education (Honebein and Cammarano, 2005). According to Honebein and Cammarano (2011), six qualities of well-designed CE need to be embraced. These qualities are shown below and synthesized through the model in Figure 2.

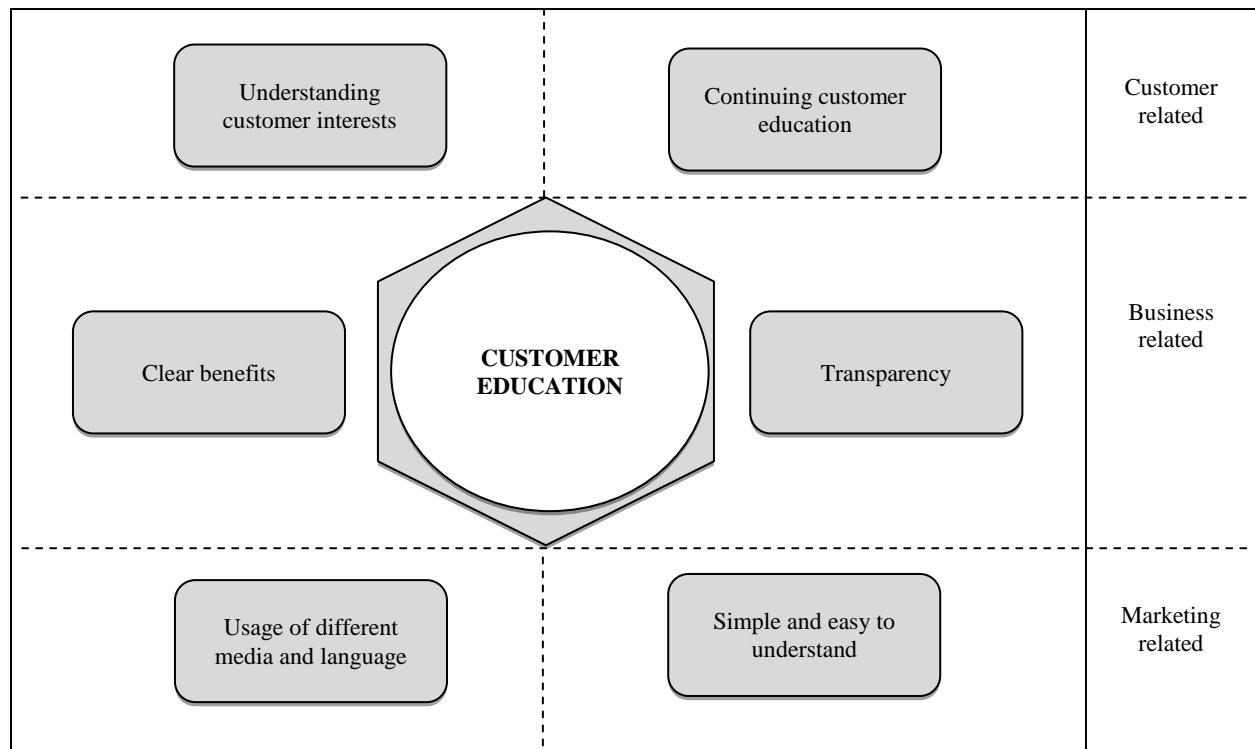


Figure 2. *The Customer education model*

Source: *Our own elaboration based on Honebein and Cammarano (2011)*

Transparency (1) is very important for CE, as customer concerns may increase otherwise. It is essential to pro-actively disclose information that smart customers might interpret wrongly, so business may use transparency to reinforce customer trust. Another crucial aspect is that customers need to be educated about the benefits of the teaching (2). Businesses position product features as benefits. Another issue is that CE consists of rationally-framed benefits that sometime do not generate attention or interest or may be obtuse. The usage of different media and language (3) is also very important. Usually, this concerns the employees of a business, as they can serve as brand ambassadors. At the same time, other media can be used for transmitting CE messages. Language and imagery play an important role in this context. It is also crucial that such education be continuous (4), as it is more effective when it is designed as a process and not as an event. It is commonly agreed that effective education relies on repetition. The usage of simple language (5) is another crucial aspect for educating customers. There are quantitative and qualitative concepts for ensuring this. A quantitative rule is that only a certain number of information bullet points should be communicated, and that easy expressions without the usage of passive voice should be used. A qualitative technique is to consider three learning styles: verbal, visual, and kinesthetic. Last but not least, trying to understand the customer's interests (6) is also essential for customer education. The needs and interests of a customer can be considered by questioning them, but it is

important to provide the opportunity for a customer to dig further in a certain topic that is especially important to them. A so-called 'opt-in' concept is recommended, as teaching only minimalistic information might incite customers to become more interested in a special issue (Honebein and Cammarano, 2011).

The Case Study: Application of an Empirical Test of the Model for a Major Private Coffee Distributor

Methodology

In order to illustrate whether and how CE can increase customer satisfaction we seek to verify if the model of Honebein and Cammarano can be applied to the coffee sector and indeed if it is suitable to create customer satisfaction, leading on to an exploration of the two research questions. In order to arrive at this point we describe the different qualities affecting Honebein and Cammarano's model throughout the literature review, before adapting the model. Then we apply the adapted model to the Italian case of a major private coffee distributor. Case study methodology can be defined as "*An empirical inquiry about a contemporary phenomenon (e.g., a "case"), set within its real-world context-especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident* (Yin, 2009, p. 18)". In particular, it can be used in different situations (Yin, 2012) such as: (1) when the research addresses a descriptive or an exploratory question as we do here i.e. RQ1: How can Honebein and Cammarano's Customer Education Model be used in the coffee sector to Create Customer Satisfaction? (2) by emphasizing the study of a phenomenon within its real-world context, it favors the collection of data in natural settings, compared with relying on "derived" data (Bromley, 1986, p. 23), that is data collected throughout the interview to the Marketing Director of the company. For these reasons the case study method is suitable to the topic to be investigated. The coffee sector is selected because in the last years it has invested many efforts in the development of programs of CE. In addition, this company is chosen because the six qualities of the Honebein and Cammarano's model are well emphasized and applicable. In this company the word innovation is claimed to be immediately translated into education, a program able to educate customers to transmit the qualities that characterize this coffee. We seek an in-depth understanding of the interaction between CE and purchase context. After a first round of data collection of the company and its culture, an in-depth interview was carried out with the Director of Marketing. This was structured into six sections aimed to investigate: (1) the level of presence of the six drivers (understanding of customer

interests, clarity of benefits, usage of different media and language, continuing customer education, transparency, ease of understanding) through open questions. (2) the level at which they affect customer satisfaction asking the interviewee to express his level of agreement about several items through a 5-point Likert scale (1= total disagreement; 5= total agreement). This methodology allows us to explore the research questions which lead to nascent theoretical and managerial implications.

Presentation of the case study

A mix of experience and passion for three generations

The company has produced toasted coffee since the beginning of 1900 and claims to be a historic coffee company. It has been coordinated by a single family for three generations and represents an example of a modern industrial business with a strict relationship between tradition and innovation. In particular it tries to develop its customers in order to do business together (The company website). The company has coffee roasting as core business but it also has active investments in other companies in the catering and bar sector, operations in shopping malls, and direct management of a number of prestigious venues where their coffee is marketed. Coordinating this important group that unites different skills, but all related to the channel of a food service industry sector that sells food and/or beverages, has enabled them to acquire complete experience in managing venues, which range from classic cafes, bars, through to restaurants where they are able to be close to their customers. Recently they have built new headquarters with state of the art production facilities to guarantee their highest quality standards, and to face new market challenges. Their current production capacity exceeds three million kilos of coffee per year. The new headquarters contain a large training area and a specially designed Tasting Room, where the coffee are selected and where the Caffè of this company blends are expertly created and studied (The company website).

Customer Education in the company opinion

“In our *School Drink Different*”- explained the Marketing and Communication Director of the company – “we organize several courses delivered by qualified teachers and structured in different levels. In this way we transfer know-how, allowing participants (that it is service staff who use the company’s coffee in preparing hot or cold drinks) to learn several notions about the coffee plant, its manufacturing and the correct use of professional tools. We allow them to assist in tasting, to see how to prepare main coffee products and refined cocktail

drinks, happy hours, a perfect ‘mise en place’ and specific topics about the management of a bar . At the end of the course we deliver a participation attestation and the Coffee Passion guide. Up to now the typical barman who attends our courses is between 20-45 years old, is the bar owner or an employer, has a secondary school degree, sometime in the catering sector”.

School “Drink Different”

“We believe that investing in training is of increasing importance to enable developing a business and increase its competitive edge. Our specialized “School Drink Different” twinned with our precious experience in the world of coffee can transfer all of our know-how and our espresso culture to you, in your territory”. Throughout this school the company offers customers the possibility to acquire professional skills and to distinguish themselves from others, providing also specialized training to preselected staff members of the company. The training, organized at different levels, transmits fundamental notions about: the coffee plant, its processing, the proper use of professional equipment, interesting sampling tests, the right methods to prepare coffee products, the refined Drink Different cocktails, and in-depth information on how to properly set up, arrange and run a bar.

Application of the model

Replies to the two research questions are provided throughout the case study. In order to reply to the first research question “How can Honebein and Cammarano’s CE Model be used in the coffee sector to Create Customer Satisfaction?” the model shown in Figure 2 has been applied to a major private coffee distributor, providing the following results: (1) *Transparency*: while customers demand transparency, being completely transparent with customers is something most utilities find challenging (Honebein and Cammarano, 2011). The concept of transparency in this company is mainly addressed to a specific type of consumers, that is bar operators or pastry chefs, given these are the participants to their educational programs. These programs are communicated by web, by brochure and through territorial sellers. Communicative style used in delivering courses is simple and easy to understand. Also information is easily accessible by participants, lessons are delivered by qualified dependents who assist participants during the course both for theoretical and practical part. Most of relationships with consumers are managed through territorial sellers and, only in few cases, by mail addressed to specific offices. This aspect (transparency) has an important effect because generally it increases trust also if only up to a certain point (Horvath and

Katuscakova, 2015). For this motivation, the company considers the level of transparency of information offered as a winning driver to get trust by customers. (2) *Clear benefits*: According to the company benefits deriving by the attendance of courses organized are communicated clearly and the most used channels are web, brochures and sellers. It is important to consider that utilities sometimes mistakenly position features as benefits (Honebein and Cammarano, 2011). This company is also very careful to verify, by means of territorial sellers, the perception of consumers about these benefits. A clear communication of benefits offered by these courses contributes to increase customer satisfaction. (3) *Usage of different media and language*: Since there is a tight relationship between marketing and CE, it is advisable to adopt an integrated marketing communications (IMC) approach (Tafesse and Kitchen, 2016) in order to disseminate customer education. In particular this approach should involve blending advertising, personal selling, public relations, direct marketing and sales promotion media channels (Honebein and Cammarano, 2011). The company uses different media to transmit consumer education concepts (media, brochures, sellers) also if there are no specific channels to specific types of customers. A relevant importance in the communication of educational courses and of information about products is played by the word-of-mouth. This is a very important tool of communication because word-of-mouth referrals have a strong impact on new customer acquisition (Trusov *et al.*, 2009) and generally, both negative and positive word-of-mouth, increase performance (Liu, 2006). According to the Marketing Director of the company the usage of different languages allows to reach a higher number of consumers. (4) *Continuing customer education*: as suggested by Honebein and Cammarano (2011) customer education must be designed as a process and not an event. This company adopts this approach, delivering courses every week. In fact to be effective, customer education must be repetitive. This is a very important aspect for the company because it allows to satisfy every type of participant and pursue educational objectives. This aspect is considered important in order to increase customer satisfaction. In fact, customer education affects customer perceived value in terms of benefits (Ben Youssef *et al.*, 2016) and, in particular, customer satisfaction (Bonfanti and Brunetti, 2014). (5) *Usage of simple language*: in this company the usage of a simple language is the rule: only information considered fundamental for each specific level of course are provided, transmitted for key points through verbal, visual and practical styles. This reflect the rules of a simple communication proposed by Honebein and Cammarano (2011): organization of elements throughout bullet points, usage a design that incorporates the three primary learning styles : verbal, visual, and kinesthetic. Relatively simple use of language is considered as very important in order to

educate and satisfy consumers. (6) *Understanding of customer interests*: the company develops specific courses on the base of the customers' needs. These are analyzed by observing customers and via continuous dialogue with them. In fact, as supported by Honebein and Cammarano (2011) CE is always constructed based on the needs of an audience and these can be discovered through audience analysis, that initially should be broad in scope, given limited customer information stored in the information system and the costs of acquiring primary data about customers. The relevance of contents of the courses delivered by the company is constantly monitored and can contribute to increase customer satisfaction. Results show a particular attention by the company to all dimensions of the customer education framework proposed in the figure 2; in the company's opinion the dimensions higher able to affect customer satisfaction are continuing CE and usage of simple language. In the application of these six qualities is emphasized also the relationship between CE and satisfaction, replying in this way also to the second research question ("RQ2. Is Honebein and Cammarano's Customer Education Model appropriate for building customer satisfaction in the coffee sector?"). Each of these qualities contributes to develop customer satisfaction in different ways: transparency can affect positively trust, while clear benefits can improve the perception of the company by customers.

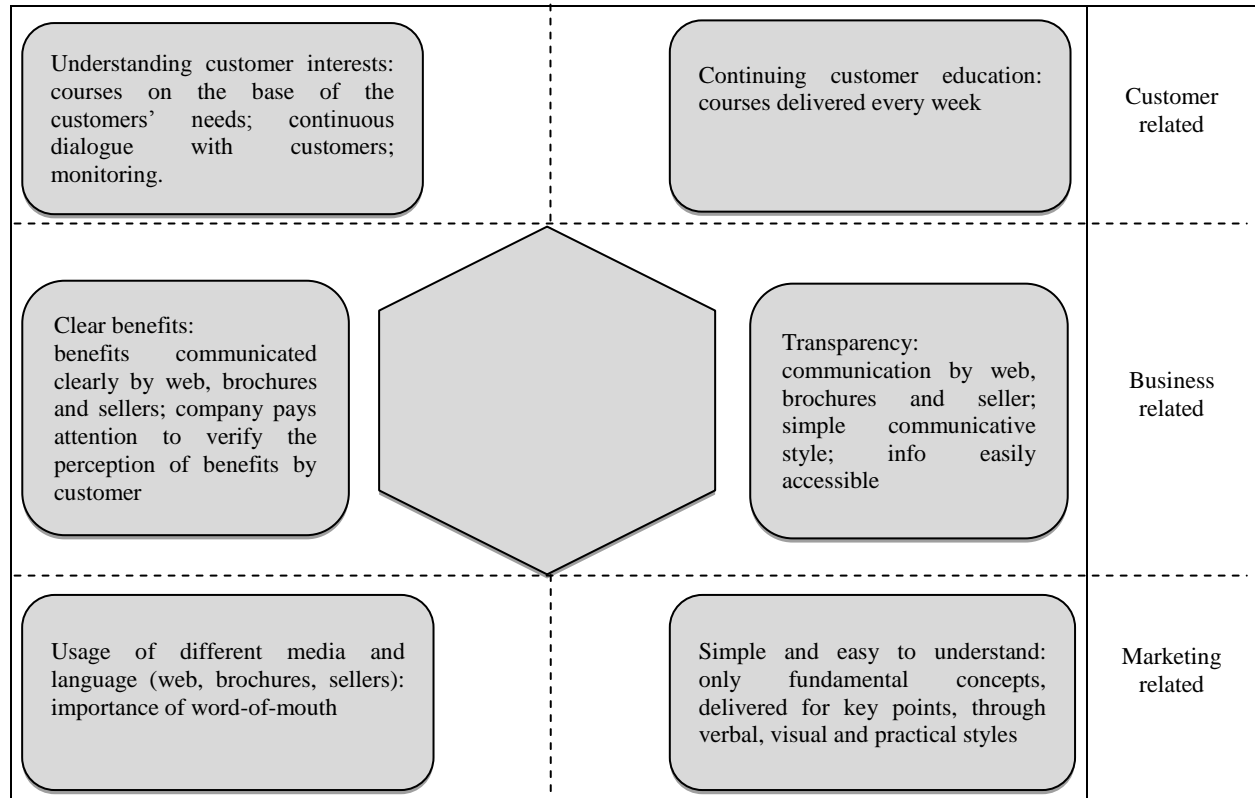


Figure 3. *The Customer education model applied to a major private coffee distributor*

Source: *Our own elaboration based on Honebein and Cammarano (2011)*

In addition throughout the usage of different media and language the company will be able to reach a higher number of consumers, more aware of the company's products, while continuing CE allows to satisfy different kinds of participant; finally usage of simple language makes easier for participants to understand contents of courses while understanding of customer interests allows to provide them the best solutions.

5. Conclusions and Implications

By integrating ideas from CE, consumer behavior and satisfaction, this exploratory paper provides an adaptation of the CE model by Honebein and Cammarano (2011), showing how this can be considered and used in a sector of the B2D sector to create customer learning and satisfaction. Also through the case study of a major private coffee distributor we emphasize the role played by the six dimensions (Fig. 1 and 2) in order to enhance customer satisfaction. Particular attention is given by the company to the provision of continuing CE, considering it as a process and not a single event and to the language used in communication that must (to them) be simple both at the qualitative (verbal, visual, etc.) and quantitative (bullet points) level. So, this paper provides a helpful approach in designing CE to the important Italian coffee industry. Results show how transparency, simple communication, clear benefits, CE, understanding of customer interests and usage of simple language are qualities playing a very important role in CE by an SME in the coffee industry. For motivation I in this industry it suggests businesses develop a prioritized body of content and to consider education as a process and not only an event. Furthermore companies in this sector need to embrace these qualities that will help them to ensure that their CE is effective, efficient and appealing. This adapted model could represent a potential referential framework for B2D firms interested in developing educational programs in order to increase customer satisfaction. Of course, this is only a starting point, and further quantitative work is anticipated. From the theoretical point of view this paper shows how a generic customer education model can be applied to specific industries, like that of coffee. In addition it provides a map of qualities supported by literature and confirmed by the case, able to increase the level of customer satisfaction. In particular, it demonstrates how these qualities reach this objective: transparency can increase trust, clear benefits, if well communicated, can be perceived better by customers, usage of different media and language allows to reach a higher number of consumer that will be more aware of the company's products, continuing customer education allows to satisfy every type of participant and pursue educational objectives, usage of simple language ease a better

understanding of the concepts by participants, understanding of customer interests allows the company to provide the right courses, in the right way and time. Furthermore, this research offers a number of managerial implications for managers in the coffee industry who want to improve their customer education. First, it describes how customer education can contribute to increase the skills of customers and their satisfaction. Second, the development of the company's knowledge by customers can ease the process of co-creation of product/service. Furthermore, if companies can adopt this tool using a high quality communication they will be able to enhance the effectiveness of customer education. This would allow companies to verify if they are using the right channels to communicate with their customers, if the language used during the courses is appropriate for participants, if their periodicity satisfy the needs of consumers, etc. A high attention should be devoted also to the preparation of educational materials that should be able to provide the right concepts to participants in a very simple way. Finally, companies should consider investing more in CE and consider it as a tool that, if adequately incorporated, can lead to customer satisfaction.

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